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Life in the eucharistic community: an empirical study in psychological type theory and
biblical hermeneutics reading John 6: 5-15

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Abstract

This study employs psychological type theory to analyse the ways in which a group of 13 newly ordained Anglican priests (in priest's orders for three or four months) reflected on the Eucharistic imagery of the Johannine feeding narrative. In the first exercise the priests worked in two groups distinguished according to their perceiving preference (7 sensing types and 6 intuitive types). In the second exercise the priests worked in three groups distinguished according to their judging preferences (4 thinking types, 4 feeling types and 5 feeling types). The data supported the significance of psychological type in shaping the hermeneutical process (the theory underpinning the SIFT method of biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching). Sensing types grappled with the plethora of detail within the text. Intuitive types looked for the bigger picture and identified major themes. Thinking types looked for and organised the major issues raised by the passage. Feeling types focused on the human and relational implications of the narrative.

Keywords: SIFT, hermeneutics, psychological type, psychology, bible, religion.

Introduction

Reader perspective has come to play an increasingly important part in contemporary hermeneutical theory regarding the reading and interpretation of scripture. Sociological categories have been crucial to defining and shaping distinctive reader perspectives, as illustrated by feminist readings, liberation readings or black readings of scripture. In their study of biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching, Francis and Village (2008) argued that psychological categories should be given a proper place alongside sociological categories in defining and shaping understanding of reader perspectives in reading and interpreting scripture.

For Francis and Village (2008) key psychological categories relevant for understanding reader perspectives are proposed by psychological type theory, as advanced initially by Jung (1971) and as subsequently developed and extended by a range of psychological type indicators, especially the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985), the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey & Bates, 1978) and the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005). Psychological type theory conceptualises core individual differences in terms of two orientations (introversion and extraversion), two perceiving functions (sensing and intuition), two judging functions (thinking and feeling), and two attitudes (judging and perceiving). Francis and Village (2008) argued that, while the two orientations and the two attitudes may be relevant for shaping the context in which and the manner through which the reading and interpretation of scripture take place, the two perceiving functions and the two judging functions are inextricably involved in the hermeneutical process itself that shapes the content of what is seen in the text and of what is proclaimed from the pulpit.

According to Jungian theory, the two perceiving functions are concerned with distinctive ways in which information is gathered and processed. Sensing types (S) prefer to

process the realities of a situation as perceived by their five senses. They attend to specific details rather than the wider picture. They are concerned with practical matters. They are down-to-earth and matter-of-fact. Intuitive types (N) prefer to process the possibilities of a situation as perceived by their imagination or their sixth sense. They attend to wider patterns and relationships rather than to specific details. They are stimulated by abstract theories. They are typically imaginative and innovative.

According to Jungian theory, the two judging functions are concerned with distinctive ways in which information is assessed and evaluated. Thinking types (T) assess and evaluate information objectively, using logic and abstract principles rather than relationships and personal values. They prize integrity and justice. They tend to be truthful and fair, even at the expense of upsetting others. Feeling types (F) process information subjectively using their personal values and their concern for relationships rather than abstract principles. They prize compassion and mercy. They tend to be tactful and empathetic even at the expense of fairness and consistency.

According to Jungian theory, for each individual, preference is shown for one perceiving function over the other (either for sensing or for intuition) and for one judging function over the other (either for thinking or feeling). Of these two preferred function (one perceiving function and one judging function), one takes precedence over the other and emerges as the individual's dominant function. The dominant sensing type emerges as the practical person; the dominant intuitive type emerges as the imaginative person; the dominant feeling type emerges as the humane person; the dominant thinking type emerges as the logical person.

Francis and Village (2008) extrapolate from psychological type theory to suggest that type preferences influence the way in which sacred text is read and proclaimed. For sensing types, interpreting a text may be largely about attending to what is actually there. They will

value interpretations that highlight the details in the text, especially those that draw on sensory information. Interpretations that begin with a repeat of the text and draw attention to details will appeal to sensing types, who will be reluctant to speculate too widely about hidden or metaphorical meanings. The sensing function draws attention to factual details so sensing types will be likely to interpret biblical passages literally rather than symbolically or metaphorically.

For intuitive types, interpreting a text may be largely about using the text as a springboard to imaginative ideas. They will be inspired by interpretations that fire the imagination and raise new possibilities and challenges. Interpretations that raise wider questions and that look for overarching or underlying concepts will appeal to intuitive types, who may find the plain or literal sense rather uninteresting. Intuitives find it natural to make links between analogous ideas and concepts, and they will be likely to interpret passages symbolically or metaphorically, rather than literally.

For feeling types, interpreting a text may be largely about applying the human dimensions to present day issues of compassion, harmony and trust. They will be drawn to empathizing with the characters in a narrative, and will want to understand their thoughts, motives and emotions. Interpretations that try to understand what it was like to be there will appeal to feeling types, who may be less interested in the abstract theological ideas that might be drawn from the text.

For thinking types interpreting a text may largely be about seeing what the text means in terms of evidence, moral principles or theology. They will be drawn to using rationality and logic to identify the ideas and truth-claims in a text. Interpretations that highlight the theological claims in a text will appeal to thinking types, who may be less interested in trying to understand the characters described by the text.

Drawing on this extrapolation from psychological type theory, the SIFT method of biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching commends approaching both the study of the text and the construction of sermons through the disciplined application of four psychological functions in the order of sensing (S), intuition (I), feeling (F), and thinking (T). In a series of three books, Francis and Atkins (2000, 2001, 2002) applied this method in a systematic approach to the principle Sunday Gospel readings proposed by the Revised Common Lectionary.

While the SIFT method of biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching had its origins in extrapolation from Jungian psychological type theory, a small (but growing) body of empirical research has begun to interrogate and to underpin this approach, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative research traditions. Support for this approach is provided by studies using quantitative approaches reported by Bassett, Mathewson, and Gailitis (1993), Village and Francis (2005), Francis, Robbins, and Village (2009), and Village (2010) and by studies using qualitative approaches reported by Francis (2010), Francis and Jones (2011), Francis (2012a, 2012b, in press), and Francis and Smith (in press). It is these qualitative studies that provide the research context for the new study reported in the present paper.

In the first qualitative study, Francis (2010) invited two different groups of Anglican preachers (24 licensed readers in England and 22 licensed clergy in Northern Ireland) to work in groups defined by their dominant psychological type preferences (dominant sensors, dominant intuitives, dominant thinkers and dominant feelers). Within these dominant type groups they were asked to prepare a presentation on Mark 6: 34-44 (the feeding of the five thousand). In his analysis of their presentations, Francis distinguished and displayed the four clear voices of the dominant type perspectives.

In the second qualitative study, Francis and Jones (2011) focused on Mark 16:1-8 and Matthew 28:1-15 (resurrection narratives), working with two different groups (26 ministry

training candidates, and 21 Anglican clergy and readers). On this occasion Francis and Jones developed a two stage process. In stage one, the participants were divided according to the perceiving process (sensing and intuition) and invited to discuss the Marcan narrative. In stage two, the participants were divided according to the judging process (thinking and feeling) and invited to discuss the Matthean narrative. In their analysis of the presentations made by the different groups, Francis and Jones distinguished and displayed the four clear voices of sensing, intuition, thinking and feeling.

In the third qualitative study, Francis (2012a) focused on Mark 11: 11-21 (the cleansing of the temple and the incident of the fig tree), working with three different groups (31 Anglican clergy, a group of 14 clergy and lay preachers, and a mixed group of 47 lay people and clergy). Instead of inviting the participants to work in dominant type groups, on this occasion Francis invited the participants to discuss the passage in two stages. For stage one, the participants were divided according to the perceiving process, distinguishing between groups of sensing types and groups of intuitive types. For stage two, the participants were divided according to the evaluating or judging process, distinguishing between groups of feeling types and groups of thinking types. In his analysis of the presentations made by different groups, Francis distinguished and displayed the four clear voices of sensing, intuition, thinking and feeling.

In the fourth qualitative study, Francis (2012b) focused on John 6: 4-22 (the Johannine feeding narrative), working with two groups of ministry training candidates (one group of 13 women and 6 men, and one group of 2 women and 5 men). On this occasion Francis invited the participants to discuss the passage in two stages. In stage one, the participants were divided according to the perceiving process and asked to accomplish three tasks: to reflect on the passage, to note issues of interest to them, and to prepare material for preaching. In stage two, the participants were divided according to the judging process and

asked to accomplish three tasks: to reflect on the passage, to note the issues raised by the passage, and to prepare material for preaching. Once again the presentations made by the different groups revealed clear differences between sensing types and intuitive types and between feeling types and thinking types.

In the fifth qualitative study, Francis (in press) focused on Mark 1: 2-8 and Luke 3: 2b-20 (John the Baptist), working with a group of 8 people associated with their local church and attending a church-based study group (3 women and 5 men). First, the Marcan narrative (concentrating on the imagery of John the Baptist) was discussed by two groups organised according to scores on the perceiving process (4 sensing types and 4 intuitive types). The data confirmed the propensity for ordinary readers who preferred sensing to concentrate on the details and practical realities of the narrative, and for those who preferred intuition to focus on the bigger picture. Second, the Lucan narrative (concentrating on the teaching of John the Baptist), was discussed by two groups organised according to scores on the judging process (3 thinking types and 5 feeling types). The data confirmed the propensity for ordinary readers who preferred feeling to identify with the human concerns displayed in the narrative, and for those who preferred thinking to analyse the narrative and to identify the theological issues.

In the sixth qualitative study, Francis and Smith (in press) focused on Matthew 2:13-20 and Luke 2:8-16 (birth narratives), working with a group of 12 training incumbents and 11 recently ordained curates (8 women and 15 men). First, the narrative of the shepherds from Luke was discussed by three groups organised according to scores on the perceiving process. In accordance with the theory, sensing types focused on details in the passage, but could reach no consensus on the larger picture, and intuitive types quickly identified an imaginative, integrative theme, but showed little interest in the details. Second, the narrative of the massacre of the infants from Matthew was discussed by three groups organised according to scores on the judging process. In accordance with theory, the thinking types

identified and analysed the big themes raised by the passage (political power, theodicy, obedience), while the feeling types placed much more emphasis on the impact that the passage may have on members of the congregation mourning the death of their child or grandchild.

Taken together these five qualitative studies have begun to develop and shape a research tradition ready to be extended to a wider range of biblical material.

Method

Research question

Against this background, the aim of the present study was to build on the recent qualitative research tradition discussed above in order to explore how psychological type preference may be reflected in reading the Johannine feeding narrative (John 6: 5-15) against the theological background of exploring life in the Eucharistic community. The hypothesis is that newly ordained priests working within groups sharing the same psychological type preference will generate interpretations of (or reflections on) this passage broadly consistent with their personal preferred psychological type.

Procedure

In the context of a residential programme conducted during October 2011, the participants were invited to complete a recognised measure of psychological type and to experience working in groups structured on the basis of psychological type theory. Reading, reflecting on, and proclaiming scripture was an integral part of a three day programme based on the structure of the Anglican Eucharistic rite. The session structured on the basis of the perceiving process (distinguishing between sensing and intuition) was given a task high on perception and low on evaluation. The session structured on the basis of the judging process was given a task high on evaluation and low on perception.

Measure

Psychological type was assessed by the 1995 edition of the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey, 1998). This instrument proposes 10 items to discriminate between introversion and extraversion and three sets of 20 items to distinguish between sensing and intuition, between thinking and feeling, and between judging and perceiving. Following the advice of Francis, Robbins and Craig (2007), tied scores on the Keirsey Temperament Sorter were assigned to introversion, intuition, feeling and perceiving.

Analysis

The groups (structured on the basis of psychological type theory) were given specific tasks (defined below), and they were invited to work on these tasks and to agree on a common presentation of their conclusions. These presentations were both written in text form and spoken in plenary when the groups re-assembled to share their conclusion with each other. It is these written texts and spoken presentations (carefully noted by the author) that provide the data for analysis. The results section of this paper presents a summary of the written work and spoken presentations, in order to allow the different perspectives emphasised by the groups to become clearly visible.

Participants

The residential workshop was attended by 13 newly ordained Anglican priests (in priest's orders for three or four months) who were willing to work with psychological type theory (9 men and 4 women). In terms of the perceiving process, there were 7 sensing types and 6 intuitive types. In terms of the judging process there were 9 feeling types and 4 thinking types. In terms of the orientations, there were 5 extraverts and 8 introverts. In terms of the attitudes, there were 10 judging types and 3 perceiving types.

Results

The perceiving process

The participants were divided into two groups: one group comprising the seven sensing types, and the other group comprising the six intuitive types. Before leaving for two separate rooms, the first part of the Johannine feeding narrative was given to the participants (John 6: 5-11), and they were given the common instruction to discuss what the passage had to say about life in the Eucharistic community.

The sensing types worked together to examine the text in great detail. On their own account, what they set out to do was to dissect the text. This approach generated a long list of disparate and often disconnected themes. They noted that:

- Jesus was in charge of the whole process,
- Jesus was like a shepherd caring for our needs,
- Philip took a pessimist view, but Andrew took an optimistic view,
- the disciples had come with nothing prepared, but their needs were met,
- everyone was satisfied with God's generosity,
- the community was well controlled and people were told to sit,
- there was a role for children in the community,
- there is equality as God feeds us all,
- there is room for all on the lush grass,
- there is a sense of movement as the food is distributed,
- all share in one meal,
- different people had different roles,
- the conversation prepares for action,
- Andrew is carefully named as Simon Peter's brother, but the boy is unnamed,
- people were given an opportunity to contribute,
- the disciples are working collaboratively with Jesus,
- Jesus felt a sense of responsibility for feeding the people,

- there was protein and carbohydrates,
- no one was turned away.

The intuitive types started by throwing ideas into the conversation. On their own account, they were not always listening to each other and they were not trying to build on each other's ideas. They relied on the reporter to sift what was being said and to record the major points. As a result they agreed on four main themes that sparked further conversation, and which helped to get all the little things gathered up into the big picture.

The first theme was *testing*. In the eucharistic community, Jesus tests us by asking where we draw our resources from, by asking whether we know where satisfaction comes from, and by asking whether we really believe that he can use what we bring.

The second theme was *equality* and *inclusivity*. In the eucharistic community, the disciples and the crowd are all treated alike, the adults and the children are all treated alike. None are left out. Jesus sees that the needs of all are met.

The third theme was *abundance*. In the eucharistic community, everyone there shared the bread and the fish, and they all had as much as they wanted.

The fourth theme was *offering*. In the eucharistic community, what we have to offer, however small, is very valuable when shared. Here the offering of the child provides the model of innocency and giving without price. Here the offering of Mother Theresa shows how one person can face such an enormous task and make a difference.

The judging process

The participants were divided into three groups: one group comprising the four thinking types, one group comprising the five highest scoring feeling types, and one group comprising the remaining four feeling types. Before leaving for three separate rooms, the fuller Johannine feeding narrative was given to the participants (John 6: 5-15), and they were given the common instruction to discuss the following questions: What are the issues that the

extra verses raise about life in the eucharistic community? What do they tell us about God and about the people of God?

The thinking types began immediately by identifying the three component parts of the exercise and by taking three separate sheets of paper on which to note: the issues about life in the eucharistic community, God, and the people of God.

The following issues were raised about life in the Eucharistic community. There was no waste and nothing was lost; we have a responsibility as good stewards of what God gives to us. There were undercurrents among the people; they were formulating their own plans for Jesus' future. The people were satisfied and they wanted Jesus to keep them satisfied; when people are dissatisfied they walk away. Jesus met the needs of the people; should we try to meet their needs too? Jesus walked away from the pressure; sometimes we need to walk away too. The people followed because they saw the sign; signs and symbols remain important to us. There was delegation with different people having different roles; we need to share that vision.

The following issues were raised about the people of God. The people of God interpret what they see through their knowledge of their tradition (this is indeed the prophet). The people of God looked for the wrong kind of leadership (they wanted a king). The people of God were talking about Jesus, but not to Jesus (Jesus perceived what was going on). The people of God are looking for signs but may misread them.

The following points were made about God. God is aware of the people's needs. God is the God of generosity. God is there among the people reaching out to their needs. But this image of God raises real theological problems about God's intervention in the world and about the hunger and starvation that continues to face the people of the world.

The feeling types saw the issues raised by the narrative in human and relational terms. They saw the leftover food as a sign of God's gift, of God's generosity, and they reflected on

our calling to share God's gifts with all. They reflected on the need of the poor and hungry across the world and our responsibility to feed them from our abundance. They saw the relationships between the people and their conversation as crucial as they tried to interpret what they had seen and experienced.

In terms of the people of God, the feeling types put themselves in the shoes of Philip as he doubted their capacity to meet the needs of the crowd; in the shoes of Andrew as he asked hopelessly 'What is that among so many people'; and in the shoes of the boy as he gave over all that he had to Jesus. They put themselves in the shoes of the crowd as they expressed their impatience with their lot in life. They had seen a better future and wanted to make it permanent by crowning Jesus as their leader.

In terms of God, the feeling types saw God at the very heart of the story, and spoke about the Trinitarian relational God. Here Jesus, God the Son, let his heart go out to the people and he comforted them. Here Jesus fed the people with the Living Bread. Here Jesus felt the pain as the people misread the sign and failed to grasp his vision for them. Here Jesus needed to withdraw again to the mountain by himself. The feeling types were feeling with Jesus and feeling for Jesus as the inevitable story unfolds.

Conclusion

The present study set out to build on four pioneering studies (that had employed a qualitative research tradition to examine the empirical bases for the SIFT method of biblical hermeneutics and liturgical preaching) by inviting a group of 13 newly ordained Anglican priests (in priests orders for three or four months) to reflect on the Eucharistic imagery of the Johannine feeding narrative within working groups that drew together individuals who shared the same psychological type preferences. In the first exercise the priests worked in two groups distinguished according to their perceiving preferences. In the second exercise the priests worked in three groups distinguished according to their judging preferences. The data

demonstrated how sensing types grappled with the plethora of detail within the text; how intuitive types looked for the bigger picture and identified major themes; how thinking types looked for and organised the major issues raised by the passage; and how feeling types focused on the human and relational implications of the narrative. Two main conclusions emerge from the cumulative evidence provided by the present study and by the five earlier studies reported by Francis (2010), Francis and Jones (2011), Francis (2012a, 2012b, in press), and Francis and Smith (in press).

The first conclusion concerns the psychological theory that underpins the SIFT method. This theory posits that the ways in which individuals read, reflect on and interpret scripture reflect their own personal psychological preferences. The data from all five studies support this psychological theory. In reading text, sensing types really do take trouble over the details, intuitive types really do grasp the bigger vision, feeling types really do give priority to the personal and interpersonal implications, and thinking types really do go for an analysis of the issues raised. Clearly a reader perspective on biblical hermeneutics is incomplete if the contribution of psychological type theory is not taken into account.

The second conclusion concerns the practical out-working of the SIFT method within the personal and professional development of those who hold responsibility for reading, interpreting and proclaiming scripture among the assembled people of God (for examples, preachers within congregations). Where preaching so often remains within the hands of individual leaders, preachers need their awareness raised of the four distinctive voices of the hermeneutical process advocated by the SIFT method (sensing, intuition, feeling, and thinking). It is important for preachers to be trained to approach scripture through their less preferred psychological type functions as well as through their dominant function. Experience-based workshops like those employed in the present study provide one efficient and effective method for implementing this kind of practical training.

Two main limitations still remain with the present state of empirical research in this field. When all these studies are considered together, only five biblical themes were explored; and only nine groups of preachers were involved in the research. These two limitations need to be addressed by further replication studies capable of extending the range of scripture employed and capable of working with other groups of preachers. The present study suggests that further research of this nature is likely to illustrate more fully the link between psychological type preferences and hermeneutical approaches.

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Appendix 1**John 6: 5-15**

When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.

When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

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